

# A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE CONCEPT OF REVELATION IN CHRISTIANITY AND ISLAM\*

---

Vincent Battaglia

## ABSTRACT

Christians and Muslims have a mutually irreconcilable understanding of the form and content of divine revelation, so argues Vincent Battaglia. He outlines the concept of revelation from both a Christian and Islamic perspective, and contrasts the two approaches by noting similarities and differences between their respective traditions. He then identifies some theological challenges within the Christian-Islamic dialogue and briefly develops rudiments of an Islamic revelation from a Christian perspective. Finally, he argues that since both traditions share a fellowship of faith, they can have a sense of being “the nearest in affection” to one another (cf. Qur’an 5:85).

---

\*Originally published in *East Asian Pastoral Review* 43, no. 3 (2006) 287–306.

In this paper I examine the concept of revelation in the Christian and Islamic traditions, and consider the implications of Islamic claims by attempting to reflect theologically on Islamic revelation from a Christian perspective. After outlining the concept of revelation from a (mainly Catholic) Christian perspective and from an Islamic perspective, I compare and contrast the two approaches to revelation by noting similarities and differences between the respective traditions. I then identify some theological challenges within Christian-Islamic dialogue regarding the concept of revelation before briefly developing the rudiments of a Christian theology of Islamic revelation. I conclude that from a Catholic Christian perspective, Christians and Muslims have a mutually irreconcilable understanding of the form and content of divine revelation, and as such Muhammad should not be seen by Christians as a prophet. This approach, I argue, still leaves open key areas for Christian theological reflection and interreligious dialogue.

## The Christian Concept of Revelation

Revelation, deriving from the Latin word *revelare*, which means “to remove the veil,” is, in essence, a cognitive apprehension of God’s self-communication, which is accessed in faith through grace. The Second Vatican Council’s Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum* (DV), says God wills that all humanity has access to God the Father, through Jesus Christ, the Divine Word made flesh, in the Holy Spirit, so that all people can “become sharers in the divine nature.”<sup>1</sup> Therefore, revelation is at once Trinitarian and salvific.

For Christians, while God revealed Godself in words and deeds to all humanity through our first parents, and in a special manner to the people of Israel, Jesus Christ has a constitutive role in the divine economies of revelation and salvation (DV 2, 3). Christ is the sole and universal mediator between God and humanity, the revealer of the Father in the Holy Spirit (cf. Mt 11:27; Jn 1:18; 3:11,35; 6:46; 10:15; 14:9), and “the completion, perfection” and “sum total of revelation” (see DV 2, 4; *Fides et ratio* [FR] 10, 11). In short, God’s revelation is God’s self-gift in Christ. As such, God is communicating Godself,

---

1. *Dei Verbum*, 2, in *Vatican II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, edited by Austin Flannery O.P. (Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1975). In this paper I rely on this translation for all references to the documents of the Second Vatican Council. See also Pope John Paul II, *Fides et ratio*, 7, 1998, <http://www.vatican.va>. (accessed 17 October 1998).

and not some divine attribute.<sup>2</sup> The proper Christian response to revelation is faith and hope through the grace of the Holy Spirit.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, revelation is both historical and transhistorical/transcendental in the person and mission of Jesus Christ, who is the Incarnate Son of God.

The good news fulfilled in Jesus and promulgated by him has been preserved and handed down to each generation through apostolic succession (*DV* 7, 8). This apostolic preaching about Jesus Christ has partly been recorded in writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and forms what Christians call the Bible. It is partly preserved orally, which is called “Tradition” (*DV* 9; cf. *Dei Filius* [*DF*] chap. 3). Together, the Bible, consisting of the old and new testaments, and Tradition form “a single sacred deposit of the Word of God, which is entrusted to the Church” (*DV* 10; cf. *DF* chap. 3). The Holy Scriptures have God as their author, but were written down by human writers for the sake of humanity (see *DV* 11, 13; *DF* chap. 2). The Bible teaches the truths about human salvation (*DV* 11), and when they are read in the liturgy, God is present in his word (*Sacrosanctum concilium* [*SC*] 7). The authentic interpretation of the Bible is reserved to the magisterium of the Church (*DV* 10; *DF* chap. 2). God guarantees the content of the Scriptures and Tradition, which constitute the Church’s rule of faith (*DV* 21). Although God can be known through reason alone, the mysteries of faith, such as the God being Trinitarian, can only be known through divine revelation.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, for Christians God is revealed as Trinitarian, acting within human history, independent of creation, and the goal of human historical and eschatological fulfillment.<sup>5</sup> The revealed Word is at once salvific, gracious, constitutive of ecclesial communion and the Christian life, and synonymous with the person of the Son of God.

The event of revelation is best seen as the intersection of objectivity (God entering human history through the unsurpassable gift of Godself in Jesus Christ) and subjectivity (human beings responding in grace through the

- 
2. Neil Ormerod, *Method, Meaning and Revelation: The Meaning and Function of Revelation in Bernard Lonergan’s Method in Theology* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2000), 19. Cf. Joseph A. Komonchak, Mary Collins, and Dermot A. Lane, ed., *The New Dictionary of Theology* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1990), s.v. “Revelation,” by John F. Haught, 884.
  3. See *Dei Verbum*, 5; cf. First Vatican Council, *Dei Filius*, chapter 3, in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils. Volume 2 (Trent to Vatican II)*, edited by Norman P. Tanner S.J. (London/Washington, D.C.: Sheed & Ward/Georgetown University Press, 1990); *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Homebush/Vatican City: St Paul’s Publications/Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994), 142–43; *Fides et ratio*, 13.
  4. See *Dei Filius*, chapters 2 and 4, and Canon 2.1; *Dei Verbum*, 6; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 36; *Fides et ratio*, 8, 9.
  5. Thomas Norris, “On Revisiting *Dei Verbum*,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 66, no. 4 (Winter 2001): 316.

Holy Spirit).<sup>6</sup> This intersection, which implies that God is Trinitarian, requires a linking of the experience of God with right understanding through making a correct cognitive judgment of the truth of metaphysical reality.<sup>7</sup> Revelation for Christians is thus not a series of propositions to be affirmed, nor a series of historical events of God's intervention in human lives, nor a subjective mystical experience or new consciousness.<sup>8</sup> Similarly revelation is not an unintelligible word or absurd message to be accepted blindly in faith.<sup>9</sup> Instead, revelation can be expressed cognitively to some extent, in propositional statements, is mediated through symbols (particularly the Christ-symbol as primordial sacrament, which makes fully present what he signifies),<sup>10</sup> and regulated (or rightly interpreted) through authentic carriers of revelation (Scriptures, Tradition, and the magisterium).<sup>11</sup> Revelation's divine meaning is carried in many ways,<sup>12</sup> and the goal of human language about God is to coherently express, cognitive meaning about the divine.

## The Islamic Concept of Revelation

The whole Islamic concept, content, and context of divine revelation centers around the figure of Muhammad (570–632 C.E.), an Arab merchant whom Muslims believe received the literal divine speech or utterance of God over a period of 22 (or 23) years through the mediation of the Archangel Gabriel. Starting in 610 C.E. in a series of theophanies, experienced aurally and visually, but which constitute one single act of revelation,<sup>13</sup> Muhammad is said to have received the Word of God *verbatim*. Muslims understand that Muhammad first committed this revelation to memory, and then orally

---

6. Ibid., 317, 323–26. Ormerod, *Method, Meaning and Revelation*, 20–21. Cf. RF 21, 29.

7. Ormerod, *Method, Meaning and Revelation*, 21, 29.

8. Here I am expressing a model of revelation that uses the language of Dulles's models of revelation. See Avery Dulles S.J., *Models of Revelation* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1992), *passim*.

9. I am here rejecting the model of revelation as a "dialectic presence" advocated by Karl Barth and Hans Urs von Balthasar. See Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, and Ormerod, *Method, Meaning and Revelation*.

10. Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 158.

11. Cf. Ibid., 267–69; Norris, "On Revisiting *Dei Verbum*," 332; *New Dictionary of Theology*, s.v. "Revelation," 884.

12. See Bernard Lonergan's typology for the carriers of divine meaning presented in Ormerod, *Method, Meaning and Revelation*, 90–96.

13. M. Fethullah Gülen, *Questions This Modern Age Puts to Islam*, 3rd ed. (Gaziemir/Izmir: Kaynak [Izmir] A.S., 1998), 68.

transmitted it to his companions, who both memorized and recorded it on bones, stones, palm leaves, parchments, and skin.<sup>14</sup> These companions, under the supervision and instruction of Muhammad, later assembled these recordings.<sup>15</sup> After two decades, following the death of Muhammad, these recordings were written down in several manuscripts, and their final form came to be known as the “Qur’an,” meaning “The Recitation” or “The Reading.”<sup>16</sup> Only one version of the text of the Qur’an is agreed upon by all schools of Islam.

The Qur’an, whose mere existence is seen as miraculous, constitutes the core and foundation of Islam. The form, content, words, and message of the Qur’an are attributed to God alone. Muhammad was only the messenger, and as such he rightly warrants the title of “prophet.” Muhammad’s prophecy, the content of which is nothing but God’s own words, is regarded by Muslims as being identical to the constant message brought by all prior prophets, and as such constitutes the final, definitive, and complete revelation which brings the history of revelation to a close. For this reason, Muhammad enjoys the title “Seal of the Prophets.” Muslims refer to the Qur’an as a “Book,” a book whose revelatory content can be divided into two traditional periods in history, the Meccan and Medinan, and as a literary work it consists of 114 chapters called *suras*. The Qur’an takes on a character unique to religious traditions because it is seen as consisting of God’s very speech, which was uttered in the most perfect Arabic (and therefore should be understood in its original language). As such it is veritably God’s literary masterpiece on account of its inimitable eloquence, whose quality is seen as being infinitely above and beyond human imagination and emulation (a claim made in the Qur’an itself: 2:23; 6: 93; 17:90). Indeed, Muslims point to Muhammad’s illiteracy and the eloquence of the Book as divine evidence of the work’s divine origin, authorship, and constitution.<sup>17</sup>

The message of the Qur’an was initially simple—namely, the announcement of the Last Judgment—but subsequent revelations variegated the message into themes such as strict monotheism, morality, and the veracity

---

14. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, “Islam,” in *Our Religions*, edited by Arvind Sharma (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1993), 445–46.

15. *Ibid.*, 445.

16. *Ibid.*; John Renard, *Responses to 101 Questions on Islam* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1998), 10. Aside from “The Reading” or “The Recitation,” the Qur’an also enjoys other titles such as “The Mother of Books,” “The Guide,” and “The Discernment,” each referring to some aspect of the sacred text. Nasr, “Islam,” 445–46. In this essay I use the Dent translation in English of the Qur’an: *The Koran*, trans. J. M. Rodwell (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1974).

17. Written from an apologetic point of view, see Gülen’s three “proofs” of the miraculous nature of the Qur’an in *Questions this Modern Age Puts to Islam*, 57–67. Gülen (*Questions this Modern Age Puts to Islam*, 71) adds that the rapid expansion of Islam and the advanced ancient Islamic civilizations are further divine proofs.

of Muhammad's prophethood.<sup>18</sup> These subsequent revelations correspond to issues that required resolution in the prophet's lifetime, and as such the Qur'an contains provisions about marriage, divorce, business practice, criminal punishments, and the conduct of war.<sup>19</sup> Thematically, they concentrate mainly on the divine nature and its attributes and the constant and universal message of monotheism in the context of a history of a sacred (but not salvation) history. It also covers cosmology, ethics, metaphysics, law, psychology of the human soul, eschatology, and prayer and contemplation.<sup>20</sup> Such is God's bounty and foresight that for many Muslims the Qur'an is seen as providing scientific information about the natural world and the social sciences long before modern science has been able to demonstrate the same phenomena.<sup>21</sup>

Islam, a term meaning submission (to God), is seen as a return to the primordial religion, the religion of Adam and Eve, Abraham (whom the Qur'an describes as a Muslim: 3:60) and all the prophets, but it is also seen as a terminal religion in that revelation is now closed.<sup>22</sup> The Qur'an lists as among the prophets Adam, Abraham, Noah, Ishmael, and Jesus of Nazareth (e.g., see *sura* 21), the last of whom is seen as Muhammad's immediate predecessor. Prophecy began in primordial time, with Adam, who covenanted on behalf of the whole human race to acknowledge the Oneness of God, and the prophets were sent in history to all peoples (Qur'an 10:48) to remind the human race of this covenant (cf. Qur'an 7:172).<sup>23</sup> All the prophets brought the same religious message (Qur'an 2:213; 21:6,93), and as such they too received via divine dictation their revelation in the form of a book. For example, the prophet Moses

---

18. Jacques Jomier, *How to Understand Islam*, translated by John Bowden (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 10.

19. Komonchak et al., *New Dictionary of Theology*, s.v. "Islam," by John L. Esposito, 528.

20. Nasr, "Islam," 448.

21. See, for example, the various claims Gülen makes about the Qur'an proving the formation and development of the human embryo (Qur'an 22:5; 23:12–14; 39:6), the process of milk formation in cattle (Qur'an 16:66), the sun's movement in the solar system (Qur'an 36:38), the expanding nature of the universe (Qur'an 51:47–48), certain laws of physics such as centrifugal and centripetal forces (Qur'an 22:65), the roundness of the earth (Qur'an 21:44), and even the big bang theory of creation (Qur'an 21:30). Gülen adds that the false scientific statements made in the Bible prove the Bible's human authorship. See Gülen, *Questions this Modern Age Puts to Islam*, 61–63, 86–94. Jomier, a Christian, states that some Muslims see in the Qur'an an announcement of interplanetary travel and the atom bomb. See Jomier, *How to Understand Islam*, 135.

22. Nasr, "Islam," 429.

23. Mahmoud Mustafa Ayoub, "The Word of God in Islam: Some Personal Reflections," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 29 (Spring 2002): 178; Nasr, "Islam," 429.

brought the Torah (e.g., Qur'an 19:52), David the Psalter (Qur'an 17:57), and Jesus brought the Gospel (Qur'an 3:3; 4:156; 19:30; 21:91; 66:12), the original of which appears to have been lost. The Qur'an is clear on the fact that Jews and Christians have corrupted or interfered with their respective texts (Qur'an 3:73–75,78; 5:16–19), or falsely interpreted them (cf. Qur'an 3:93; 5:43), and as such their respective scriptures required the definitive and final correction by the Qur'an. The Torah and the Christian scriptures are not abrogated as such but rather their original message has been restored by the Qur'an (cf. Qur'an 26:196; 46:12), and therefore, these writings still retain some modicum of truth insofar as they truthfully speak of what the Qur'an reveals as true.<sup>24</sup> The Qur'an, however, is the only true source of Christianity (and Judaism), and any references to the Bible are allusive and tendentious.<sup>25</sup> As a sacred text, the Qur'an repeatedly reinforces its own primacy and ultimacy above and beyond all other religious texts.<sup>26</sup>

Whilst exegetical interpretation of the Qur'an has a long and authoritative tradition, as a sacred text it can be accessed by individual Muslims, who are able to read it as the literal Word of God and order their lives by it. Communally, it is celebrated as the content of divine worship at the mosque. Indeed, the most devout and profound Islamic prayer consists of reverently (and correctly) reciting the Qur'an in its original language. Muhammad's role in the reception of the Divine Word has exalted his status to the various roles of teacher, (living) model and exemplar of every aspect of Islamic practice and values.<sup>27</sup> Although Muslims desist from divinizing Muhammad (which would be repeating the fundamental mistake that Christians make about Jesus), he is seen as the most perfect of creatures, the perfect man, the beloved of God, and the best interpreter of God's Word (cf. Qur'an 33:56).<sup>28</sup> Some mystics and

---

24. Komonchak et al., *New Dictionary of Theology*, 527; Abdulaziz Sachedina, "Is Islamic Revelation an Abrogation of Judaeo-Christian Revelation? Islamic Self-identification in the Classical and Modern Age," in *Islam: A Challenge for Christianity*, edited by Hans Küng and Jürgen Moltmann (London: SCM Press, 1994), 100–101. Jane Dammen McAuliffe, "Is There a Connection between the Bible and the Qur'an?," *Theology Digest* 49, no. 4 (Winter 2002): 312.

25. Jomier, *How to Understand Islam*, 145.

26. McAuliffe, "Is There a Connection between the Bible and the Qur'an?," 304.

27. Johns describes how Muslims even try to emulate aspects of Muhammad's human behavior such as the side on which he slept, his use of the toothpick, and the way he smiled. Anthony Johns, "Islam: Genesis, Doctrine and Character," in *The Australasian Catholic Record* 64, no. 1 (1987): 16.

28. Nasr, "Islam," 450.



Sufis have gone further and looked upon Muhammad as some kind of celestial or cosmic figure and even the Logos (interpreted as God's first creation).<sup>29</sup> Muhammad's practices/deeds (*sunnah*) and his sayings are recorded in a voluminous work called the Hadith, composed in the two centuries following his death. The Hadith, despite being compiled on the basis of oral human testimony about the prophet, is also regarded as divinely revealed, although it ranks as the secondary source of divine revelation.<sup>30</sup>

## A Comparative Analysis of the Concept of Revelation in Christianity and Islam

Christianity and Islam share some aspects of the notion of revelation. First, Christians and Muslims are monotheists, and believe in the same God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (cf. Ex 3:6; Mt 22:32).<sup>31</sup> Both traditions accept the absolute and infinite nature of God, a point dear to Muslims. The Muslim term for God is Allah, meaning "the God" (*ho Theos*), which has an historical connotation of being the supreme God worshipped by pre-Muslims polytheists whose pantheon had the *Ka'ba* as its cultic center. Second, Christians and Muslims share the concept of "natural theology," that is, that God can be known (but not delimited) by human reason through the observance of God's handiwork in creation. Third, both Christians and Muslims agree that the proper response to revelation is submission to God's will in faith (cf. Jam 4:7; 1Pet 5:6).<sup>32</sup> In this way, Islam could be seen as a Christian virtue, too. Fourth, Christians and Muslims agree on certain positions about Jesus, namely his virginal birth (Qur'an 19:20–21), purification, prophethood (e.g., Qur'an 19:31; 4:156; 21:91; 66:12), sinlessness, ascension (Qur'an 3:484), eschatological return (5:116), as well as the perpetual virginity (Qur'an 19:27; 21:91; 66:12) and immaculate conception of his mother (cf. Qur'an 3:31).<sup>33</sup>

---

29. Renard, *Responses to 101 Questions on Islam*, 70–71; Nasr, "Islam," 451.

30. Nasr, "Islam," 12–13.

31. Cf. *Nostra aetate* (NA) 3; *Lumen gentium* (LG) 16.

32. DV 5 and DF chap. 3.

33. Not all Muslims accept *sura* 3:31 to imply the immaculate character of Mary; Jomier, *How to Understand Islam*, 45. The claim for Mary's immaculate conception is, however, supported by the *Hadith*; Tobias (Alí Músá) Mayer, "A Muslim Speaks to Christians," *Priests and People* (January 2003): 10–11. One specific theological question resulting from a consideration of Mary's immaculate conception is the extent to which, if any, Islam has a concept of original sin.



Jesus is even described in the Qur'an as the word of God (Qur'an 3:44–45; 4:171), servant of God (Qur'an 19:31), spirit of God (Qur'an 4:171; 21:91; 66:12), one strengthened by the Holy Spirit (Qur'an 2: 81,254; 19:30–33), and messiah (e.g., Qur'an 3:45; 4:171; 5:17; 17:72). Admittedly, some of these beliefs are understood differently by Christians and Muslims, and do not imply any divinity in Jesus by Muslims (see *sura* 112).<sup>34</sup> Muslims, do, however, accept Jesus's miracle-workings, albeit interpreted as proving his prophetic mission (e.g., 2:254; 3:43; 5:110; 43:63; 61:6), and his extraordinary forgiveness and love of enemies. Fifth, the Word of God (however understood) in both Christianity and Islam is at once revelatory, salvific, creative, transformative, eschatological, and constitutive of their respective faith communities. Sixth, both Christians and Muslims could perhaps meaningfully share the 99 names of God in Islam as being divine descriptors operating to communicate non-cognitive meaning.<sup>35</sup> Seventh, there is a shared belief in the existence of angels, and they seem to have much the same role in both traditions. Finally, there is a shared sense amongst Christians and Muslims that the Word of God can never be exhausted by human beings or the created order, and that neither the Bible nor the Qur'an contains all the words of God (cf. Jn 21:25; Qur'an 18:109; 31:27).

Christianity and Islam also differ in key areas concerning revelation, reflecting Islam's wholesale rejection of Chalcedonian Christology.<sup>36</sup> First, Christians view Jesus as both the Christ and God (cf. Jn 20:28) whereas Muslims view Muhammad as a man, albeit the perfect man. Second, Christians see in Jesus not only a prophet (e.g., Mt 13:57; 16:14; 21:11,46; Mk 6:15; Lk 24:19; Jn 2:11; 4:19; 9:17), but also a priest (see Heb 2:17; 3:1; 4:14; 5:5,10; 6:20; 7:26; 8:1; 9:11; 10:21) and a king (cf. Jn 18:36–37), whilst Muslims see in him only prophethood. In any event, Christians and Muslims do not share a common understanding of prophethood. Muslims believe that, as a prophet,

---

34. Terms such as “word of God” and “spirit of God” are interpreted by Islamic scholars to mean that Jesus was created by God by a direct word and not according to the process of nature. That is, Jesus did not have a natural father, just like Adam (Qur'an 3:52). Thomas J. O'Shaughnessy, *Word of God in the Qur'an* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1984), 41,43,46; Ayoub, “The Word of God in Islam,” 177. Similarly, the term “servant of God” means that Jesus was a mere creature, and “messiah” is an honorific title only and does not convey the meaning that it does to Christians; Harald Suermann, “The Rational Defense of Christology within the Context of Islamic Monotheism,” in *The Myriad Christ: Plurality and the Quest for Unity in Contemporary Christology*, edited by T. Merrigan and J. Haers (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2000), 274.

35. Jomier, *How to Understand Islam*, 131.

36. A. González Montes, “The Challenge of Islamic Monotheism: A Christian View,” in *Islam: A Challenge for Christianity*, edited by Hans Küng and Jürgen Moltmann (London: SCM Press, 1994), 71.

Jesus had a mission that was limited to the children of Israel, that his essential message was monotheism (not the kingdom of God), and that he foretold the future coming of Muhammad.<sup>37</sup> Third, for Christians, the Word of God was made flesh, but for Muslims the Divine Word became a Book.<sup>38</sup> Thus the “incarnation” may be compared with the *inlibration* in Islam.<sup>39</sup> As such, both Christ and the Qur’an represent and become the final, definitive, and universal message for humankind, and both bring revelation to a close. Conviction in the universality of their respective beliefs drives both Christian and Muslim missionary activity (see Qur’an 9:33). Fourth, Christians believe in the salvific passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus as historical events with metahistorical significance, whereas the Qur’an describes Jesus’ crucifixion as only an appearance (Qur’an 4:156–57) and this passage is interpreted by most Islamic scholars to be a rejection of Jesus’s crucifixion.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, Islamologists argue that the Qur’an’s leitmotiv cannot tolerate a crucified Jesus because such a notion implies the doctrine of original sin (which Muslims do not accept) and that prophets could be defeated by God’s enemies.<sup>41</sup> Fifth, for Christians the Bible forms part of the deposit of revelation of the Word of God (along with Tradition); however, Muslims behold the Qur’an as the literal word(s) of God. Sixth, Christians are able to declare that both God and human beings authored the Bible, whereas in Islam, Muhammad had no role in (the reception of) revelation except to act as its faithful transmitter.<sup>42</sup> Seventh, the church is both

37. Muslims see the *Bible* as also proving that Jesus preached Muhammad’s coming by their interpretation of the promise of the Paraclete in Jn 14:26 (and also in Jn 15:26), and rely upon the resemblance of the two words “Muhammad” and “Paraclete” in Syriac. Jomier, *How to Understand Islam*, 153; Mayer, “A Muslim Speaks to Christians,” 10. Similarly, Mt 10:5 is used apologetically by Muslims to prove that even Jesus limited his mission to the house of Israel, and Mt 21:43 is seen as Jesus himself predicting subsequent Islamic triumph. McAuliffe, “Is There a Connection between the Bible and the Qur’ān?,” 310–11.

38. Thus, Christians are required to reject the Islamic categorization of Christianity as a religion of the Book. Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)* 108.

39. Mayer, “A Muslim Speaks to Christians,” 12.

40. The traditional interpretation of this part of *sura* 4 is that either the Christian disciples were under a false impression as to whether Jesus really died on the cross or someone else was crucified in his stead (and Simon the Cyrene is the most frequently suggested candidate). Some Islamic scholars such as Tobias Mayer, however, have accepted the crucifixion at face value but interpreted Jesus’s death as a spiritual victory of one of God’s martyrs (see Qur’an 2:154; 3:169). See Mayer, “A Muslim Speaks to Christians,” 11.

41. Hendrik Vroom, *No Other Gods: Christian Belief in Dialogue with Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam*, translated by Lucy Jansen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 108; Suermann, “The Rational Defense of Christology,” 274; Jomier, *How to Understand Islam*, 103, 109.

42. Ayoub is prepared to argue for some degree of human contribution in the reception of the Qur’an, on the basis of the collection and final recension of the Book by Muhammad’s followers, and because revelation was given, and even further amended, on the basis of the human needs of the nascent Muslim community. His approach, which he describes as the

the recipient and producer of revelation whereas Muslims see the community (*ummah*) as the preserver of revelation.<sup>43</sup> Eighth, Christians believe that the church plays an interpretative role in understanding the Bible, and admits different senses of Scripture,<sup>44</sup> whilst in Islam there is no such teaching office although the concept of the faith community's consensus is important. Ninth, the Christian New Testament differs from the Islamic claim that Jesus received a book called the Gospel, which was the authentic written revelation for Christians. Tenth, Christians and Muslims disagree on the authorship/reception of the books of the Hebrew Bible. For example, most Christians today do not believe that David received the Psalter in one theophanic act of revelation (see Qur'an 17:57). Moreover, Christians view Jesus as having taught with his own authority, whereas Muslims are insistent on Muhammad's simple transmission (not mediation) of God's teaching and he therefore taught with God's authority.<sup>45</sup> Eleventh, Muslims view the Qur'an and the Hadith as the primary sources of the specific content of divinely revealed positive law, whereas the Bible plays no equivalent role for Christians, who instead look upon Christ as demanding a New Law of Beatitudinal Love. Twelfth, Christians confess the One God as the "consubstantial Trinity" of the Father, Son and Spirit, "one God in three persons,"<sup>46</sup> but Islam does not admit multiplicity in the Godhead. Thirteenth, Christians hold together an immanent and a transcendent God whereas Allah for Muslims does not appear to be "Emmanuel," God-with-us (cf. Mt 1:23).<sup>47</sup> Indeed, Muslims view the utter transcendence of God as the primary reason for the rejection of the doctrine of the Trinity.<sup>48</sup> Finally, Christians and Muslims differ on anthropology,<sup>49</sup> as Muslims claim

---

humanity of divine revelation, appears to take the role of human mediation in the reception of God's Word further than other Islamic authors considered in this essay. See Ayoub, "The Word of God in Islam," 74.

43. Ayoub, "The Word of God in Islam," 178.

44. See CCC 115–19. The Church has authoritatively canvassed various methods, approaches and principles of Biblical interpretation: see The Pontifical Biblical Commission 1993.

45. Jomier, *How to Understand Islam*, 137–38.

46. CCC 253.

47. Pope John Paul II says that Muslims have many beautiful names for God but He is a God of Majesty, never Emmanuel; John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, translated by Jenny McPhee and Martha McPhee (London: Jonathan Cape, 1994), 92. Nasr, a Muslim, takes a different view and holds that the Qur'an 57:3 and 2:115 demonstrate that God is also immanent according to Qur'anic revelation; Nasr, "Islam," 457. I note also that one of the 99 "most beautiful names of God" is "The Immanent." See Jomier, *How to Understand Islam*, 42.

48. Ayoub, "The Word of God in Islam," 76; Montes, "The Challenge of Islamic Monotheism," 71.

49. JP II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, 93.

all humanity once formed one single nation and community which was rent asunder by disbelief in the ancient Qur'anic message,<sup>50</sup> despite the sending of prophets to each nation with the same monotheistic message. Christians do not share this claim.

Certain analogies and other comparisons can be made which are instructive of deeper attitudes to revelation in the respective traditions. First, whilst Christians see Christ as fulfilling the promises to the people of Israel, with Christianity thereby fulfilling Judaism, Islam sees itself as the restoration of prior revelation rather than a fulfillment of it. Second, the notion of Tradition, which in Christianity acts to transmit faithfully the unwritten supernatural revelation (cf. *DF* 2), has an analogy with the oral tradition about Muhammad, which was faithfully recorded in writing in the Hadith and which is also divinely revealed. Alternatively, the Hadith could be compared with the Four Gospels, both of which attempt to record for the faith community something of the words and deeds of Muhammad and Jesus respectively. Third, the doctrine of the Mystical Body of Christ has its analogy in the solidarity of the *ummah*. Fourth, the concept of the agreed practice of the faithful (*ijma'*) as a source of divine law (along with the Qur'an and Hadith), operates analogously to the notion of *sensus fidelium* in Catholic theology.<sup>51</sup> Fifth, as Christians view Mary as the bearer of the Divine Word "incarnate" and as Muhammad is seen by Muslims as the pure receptacle of the Divine Word *inlibrate*, then there is a deep parallel between these two figures. Mary's virginity and Muhammad's illiteracy are seen as the necessary preconditions for the reception of the Word as man or book.<sup>52</sup> Jesus is therefore to be compared with the Qur'an (and not with Muhammad), as both Jesus and the Qur'an are embodiments of the Word Itself. Finally, Christians and Muslims share a number of practices and beliefs that result from their respective understanding of revelation, such as ascetic practices (e.g., fasting, pilgrimages), the efficacy of intercessory prayer (many Muslims pray also to Muhammad),<sup>53</sup> and some common Bible-based ethics.

---

50. Ayoub, "The Word of God in Islam," 76.

51. Renard, *Responses to 101 Questions on Islam*, 70.

52. Mayer, "A Muslim Speaks to Christians," 12–13; Ayoub, "The Word of God in Islam," 74–75.

53. Renard, *Responses to 101 Questions on Islam*, 70.

## Some Challenges within Christian-Islamic Interreligious Dialogue Regarding the Concept of Revelation

Whilst the similarities between the two faiths provide a fertile base for interreligious dialogue, the differences between the two traditions about the concept of revelation presents a number of significant challenges for both Christians and Muslims.

Christians, for their part, firstly need to determine whether Muslims believe in God.<sup>54</sup> This question cannot be answered *a priori*, and is determined, like all other theological conclusions, only after having first studied the concrete claims of Islam. Of course, the question is answered using tradition-based (in this case Christian) criteria. Following *Nostra Aetate* (no.3), I take the position that Christians and Muslims worship the one same eternal God, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the Creator and “Life-Giver.”<sup>55</sup> The second challenge for Christians is to determine, again in an *a posteriori* manner, the significance, if any, of Muhammad in the economy of divine revelation. Possible answers to this problem require Christians to reflect on key intra-Christian questions, such as the criteria of authentic prophecy, the lineaments of the action of the Holy Spirit outside the visible confines of the Church,<sup>56</sup> and the function of experiential or mystical aspects of the human encounter with the divine. Thirdly Christians, especially Catholics, are challenged to articulate the “ray of truth” (*NA* 2) evident in Islam, and to reflect whether and how this can be a manifestation of supernatural revelation. In short, in the words of *Dominus Iesus* (*DI*), Christians are called to reflect “if and in what way the historical figures and positive elements” of Islam “may fall within the divine plan of salvation” achieved in Jesus Christ (*DI* 14).

Muslims face their own unique challenges when engaging in dialogue with Christians. The first and primary challenge is whether Muslims can be open to shifting the normative paradigm that the Qur’an, honored as the literal Word of God, *a priori* sealing the outcome of all dialogue by pre-determining solutions to all questions before they are even asked.<sup>57</sup> That is, is Islam open to accepting religious conclusions, resulting from comparative religious

---

54. This is Vroom’s primary question for Christians when engaging in a study of Islam. Vroom, *No Other Gods*, 91ff.

55. “Life-Giver” is one of the Islamic names of God. See Jomier, *How to Understand Islam*, 42.

56. Cf. *Gaudium et Spes* (*GS*) 22; Pope John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio* (*RM*) 18 (1990), <http://www.vatican.va> (accessed 22 April 2002); Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dominus Iesus* (*DI*) 12 (2000), <http://www.vatican.va>. (accessed 13 August 2001).

57. Jomier, *How to Understand Islam*, 150.

analyses, which are different from that which is literally stated in the Qur'an? If answered in the negative, then dialogue is restricted before it has even begun. If answered in the affirmative, then Muslims are required to conclude that the Qur'an cannot always be used as a monolithic benchmark for God's revealed truth. Aside from its implications for Islamic self-understanding about revelation, this fundamental question gains practical currency in the light of the way that Islamic apologists use the Qur'an to prove matters ranging from political science, legal theory, moral rectitude, and contemporary scientific discoveries. A second challenge for Islam is to be open to claims by Christians about their *own* (i.e., Christian) beliefs, given that Christians could easily demonstrate that the portrayals of Christianity in Islam are inaccurate, distorted and/or caricatured. For example, the Qur'an states that Christians believe that the Trinity consists of God, Jesus, and Mary (Qur'an 5:73), and that Christians have misread their own religious texts (Qur'an 5:16–19), such as failing to realize that in Jn 14:26 Jesus promises not the Paraclete but Muhammad.<sup>58</sup> A third challenge is being open to historical-critical exegesis of the Qur'an, in the same manner that the Bible has been subjected over the past 150 years. In many ways this represents a challenge for Islam to be open to the rationalistic rigors of modernity. It would seem that responses to this challenge range from a denial of the issue, acceptance of the issue and claiming that Islam has successfully warded off this challenge, or humbly admitting that more work is required in this area.<sup>59</sup> Understandably, challenging the Qur'an scientifically (understood broadly) becomes more of an issue for Muslims than similarly challenging the Bible for Christians, as the Qur'an is seen as God's literal Arabic speech, immutable and manifestly clear for all peoples and for all time. One key area of historical interest for Christians is the claim that Jesus did not die on the cross, a claim that could be evidenced by non-Christian historians.<sup>60</sup> Another important issue that could be the subject of scientific inquiry is the

---

58. This particular claim about the misunderstanding of Jn 14:26 is an extra-Qur'anic claim.

59. See, for example, Gülen's affirmation that "Islam can by itself solve every problem"; Gülen, *Questions this Modern Age Puts to Islam*, 43–44. This approach can be compared with that reported in the article, "Muslims Criticize Article on Qur'an Research," *Christian Century* 116 (3 March 1999): 242.

60. In terms of ancient historians, Tacitus, a Roman, wrote in his *Annals*, xv.44.4 that Jesus "suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberias under the hands of one of our procurators [sic], Pontius Pilatus." Josephus, a Jew, in his *Antiquities of the Jews*, xx.9.1, had earlier described Jesus as "the so-called Christ," and Pliny in his *Epistle*, x.96.7, tells of Christians who turn "to Christ as a god." Extracts of these documents are available in J. Stevenson, ed., *A New Eusebius: Documents Illustrating the History of the Church to AD337*, 2nd ed. (London: SPCK, 1957/1987).

content of Jesus's prophetic message—in essence, monotheism for Muslims and the imminence-presence of the Kingdom of God for Christians (e.g., see Mk 1:14; Mt 4:17; Lk 4:43, 17:20; Jn 3:3,5). Lastly, Muslims are attitudinally challenged to respect Christians as monotheists and to accord some degree of importance to the Christian scriptures, at least by recognizing the Bible's constitutive role in Christian revelation rather than dismissing it as irrelevant on account of its presumed unreliability.

## Towards a Christian Theology of Islamic Revelation

In the light of differing and converging aspects of revelation in Christianity and Islam, Christians are required to make some sense of Islam for themselves. On the cognitive level, Christian theologians are challenged to provide a coherent theology about any divine purpose and meaning attributable to the figure of Muhammad and the entire Islamic tradition, utilizing the resources of the Christian faith. Several simplistic approaches can be dealt with immediately. The most simplistic position—that both religions are basically similar—can be quickly dismissed on the basis that even a superficial comparison proves otherwise. Besides, to take this position is to adopt an Islamic approach, as Islam views Christianity's true message as the basic original message of all religions—the Oneness of God.<sup>61</sup> Islam does hold, however, that Christians have erred from the true, primordial religion. Conversely, it is manifestly incorrect to conclude that Islam and Christianity have no points of convergence.

Various positions are possible in relation to the role, if any, of Muhammad in the economy of divine revelation.<sup>62</sup> The first position is to hold that Muhammad was not a prophet, at least not a true prophet, using either the Biblical criteria for true prophecy (Deut 13:2–6; 18:9–22) or Christ's own criterion of judging prophets by their fruits (Mt 7:15–20; cf. 24:11, 24). Whilst the second test for authentic prophecy may be appropriate, it is divisive (as it presumes to judge Muhammad's character),<sup>63</sup> however, the Biblical tests probably could be applied to conclude that Muhammad was not a true Biblical

---

61. Jomier, *How to Understand Islam*, 135.

62. See *ibid.*, 142–44; Vroom, *No Other Gods*, 114–21.

63. Jomier argues that Muhammad's character, or at least his sincerity, remains a problem for Christians, even though Muslim scholars have throughout the ages gone to great lengths to establish that Muhammad was the most faithful of all men. See Jomier, *How to Understand Islam*, 144–45.



prophet.<sup>64</sup> A second position is to hold that just as Jesus Christ accomplished blessings for Isaac and his descendants, Abraham's other line of descendants through Ishmael (see Gen 17:20; 21:13; 25:12–18; cf. Rom 9:7) accomplished blessings in Muhammad, as the Arabs see themselves as Ishmael's descendants (cf. Qur'an 2:122). The fatal flaw with this approach is that it misinterprets both the Christian and Islamic traditions. A third approach is to redefine prophecy in a way that is experiential, psychological or "mystical,"<sup>65</sup> and on this basis it could be concluded that Muhammad had a real and profound religious experience and witnessed to others the benefits of his sapiential insight. Whilst such an approach may claim Biblical precedents (e.g., see Num 22–24; Acts 10:1–8, 22, 30–33), it also defines prophecy in a way that is unacceptable to both Christians and Muslims, and may at best only suggest personal self-belief as the hallmark of prophecy. A fourth position is broadly pluralist, namely one which sees Muhammad as a prophet and the Qur'an as the Word of God for Muslims. This approach, however, does not do justice to the exclusive claims of universality in both Islam and Christianity.<sup>66</sup>

It would appear that for Muslims the acceptance by Christians of the title prophet for Muhammad would imply that Christians are bound to accept the content of Muhammad's revelation. This is because Muslims define as prophets those who receive divine revelation. A further complicating factor is that Muslims honor Muhammad as the symbol of Arab unity and authenticity, and this operates to provide the Arab nation with a universal role as the bearer of salvation.<sup>67</sup> Thus, the rejection of Muhammad's role as a prophet, let alone as the "Seal of the Prophets," strikes at the heart of this apotheosis of Arabism.<sup>68</sup>

It would seem to me that the Christian understanding of prophecy precludes Christians from accepting Muhammad as a prophet. Whilst one may wish to judge that Muhammad had a mystical encounter with the God of the Christians, such a conclusion does not significantly advance Christian-Muslim

---

64. This position is taken not only by Vroom, a Christian, but also by Ayoub, a Muslim. See Vroom, *No Other Gods*, 119, 121; Ayoub, "The Word of God in Islam," 77.

65. This approach may also approximate to Dulles's "inner experience" and "new awareness" models: see Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, passim.

66. It is interesting to note that Ayoub appears to adopt a pluralist approach in his earlier work, which seems unusual for an Islamic writer. He has argued that "the multiplicity of expressions of faith . . . is [perhaps] willed by God to show that the truth is larger than any of its expressions," and that in this globalized world we are "tribes of Abraham, some physically, but all of us spiritually." See Ayoub, "The Word of God in Islam," 77.

67. Jomier, *How to Understand Islam*, 144; Johns, "Islam," 17.

68. Johns, "Islam," 17

dialogue. Furthermore, whilst Muhammad's revelation could be regarded as natural or general, the Christian tradition (at least from a Roman Catholic perspective) could not be satisfactorily manipulated to incorporate the Qur'an as being in any sense "the divinely revealed Word of God" (*DI* 8). This is because Christians understand Jesus Christ as the fullness of God's revelation, indeed as God's self-revelation, and as such is unsurpassable and definitive. *Dei Verbum* describes the Christian economy of divine revelation as final, and that no new public revelation is to be expected before Jesus's eschatological return (*DV* 4; see also *Catechism of the Catholic Church* [CCC] 66–67). As such, the form and content of the Qur'an and the form and content of Christian revelation are mutually irreconcilable. While attempting to crown Muhammad with the title of prophet—which maybe a generous gesture to Muslims—it does not do justice to Christianity is only a secondary issue. The primary issue, for Christians, is about christology (not prophecy, strictly understood). Christians are justified by their tradition to reject any claim that the Qur'an is a new gospel (cf. Gal 1:8). In any event, as human beings can come to the knowledge of the One God (Islam's prime article of faith) through reason, then this does not per se grant Islam a supernatural origin.<sup>69</sup>

The approach I have taken here challenges Christians to ponder just how Muhammad can operate to point to Christ (cf. Jn 1:29). Different theological paradigms can be used, such as one that sees Islam as a *preparatio evangelica* for the Arab nation(s), or as a religion with many positive and true features but which finds its fulfillment in Christianity.<sup>70</sup> Theological reflection in this area could perhaps be able to affirm that Islam continues to play an historical role in bringing individuals and peoples of the world to submission in faith in the One God, who is All Merciful and All Holy, and Who is Sovereign and Judge of all. This role in bringing people to faith in God could legitimately be seen as the work of the Holy Spirit operating outside the Church (cf. Jn 3:8), and therefore, the sincere faith responses by Muslims ought to be respected by Christians. There may also be room for interpreting the Qur'an as providing some evidence of a trinitarian concept of God (see Qur'an 17:85) and some

69. Gavin D'Costa, *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity* (New York: Orbis Books, 2000), 103.

70. See Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 176; cf. Roch Kereszty, "The Word of God: Christianity, Judaism and Islam," in *Catholic International: The Documentary Window on the World* 13, no. 1 (February 2002): 30. Explaining the various paradigms available is beyond the scope of this essay.

convergence about the Eucharist (see Qur'an 5:112-15), although such interpretations may still be anathema to Muslims.<sup>71</sup>

This approach also can adequately deal with the exclusive claims by Muslims, albeit from a somewhat apologetic perspective.<sup>72</sup> For example, the claim about the miraculous literary nature of the Qur'an can be answered by postulating about the literacy (and religious background) of Muhammad's literate disciples who recorded Muhammad's words, while claims about beauty may not enjoy universal assent. The Islamic claim that the Qur'an is uncreated and co-eternal with God, and therefore analogous to the Christian claim about Jesus, has been proven to be a claim made not by Muhammad but by his disciples. Similarly, Islamologists have explained the Islamic claim that Muhammad did not know about the Bible (because of his illiteracy) by noting that he was familiar with heterodox forms of Christianity prevalent in seventh-century Arabia, especially Nestorianism, Docetism, Elkesaism, and Ebionitism, as well as with stories from the *Talmud* and *Midrash*. In addition, many of the stories in the Qur'an reflect similar stories available in contemporaneous (and mainly apocryphal) literature, stories which were free-floating in Muhammad's own world. For example, the narrative of Jesus's infancy resembles that found in the Arabic Gospel of the Infancy; the childhood of Mary narrative appears to come from the *Protoevangelium* of James, and the Armenian Book of Infancy uses the term "Word of God" in a way in which it is used in the Qur'an. Muhammad's lack of understanding of the Trinity (from an orthodox Christian perspective) can sympathetically be seen as his personal response to the *aporia* of Jesus being human and divine.<sup>73</sup> Considerations of this kind provide necessary Christian positions on Islamic faith claims.

---

71. Mayer says that an "esoteric" (*al-bāṭin*) approach to Islam enables Christian-Muslim dialogue to enter a deeper level that reaches beyond the safety of the traditional Muslim "exoteric" (*al-zāhir*) approach. In this way he postulates Islam and Roman Catholic Christianity converging on key concepts such as the Trinity, Word of God, and the Eucharist, although he acknowledges that few Islamic scholars are prepared at this stage to adopt this methodology. See Mayer, "A Muslim Speaks to Christians," 11–13.

72. Renard, *Responses to 101 Questions on Islam*, 107–8; O'Shaughnessy, *Word of God in the Qur'an*, 19–34, 41ff; Jomier, *How to Understand Islam*, 6, 104, 153; Vroom, *No Other Gods*, 118–19; Mayer, "A Muslim Speaks to Christians," 10; Johns, "Islam," 11; Wiel Logister, "The Challenge of Mohammed about the Place of Jesus Christ," in *The Myriad Christ: Plurality and the Quest for Unity in Contemporary Christology*, edited by T. Merrigan and J. Haers (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2000), 269.

73. Logister, *The Myriad Christ*, 269.

## Conclusion

From a Christian perspective, the concept of revelation in Islam differs sufficiently from the position of orthodox Christianity so as to disable any attempt at simple conflation. Islam is a self-declared religion of the Book, whilst Christians rightly resist this Islamic category and insist on an identity defined unequivocally by the person of Jesus Christ. Relativizing such divergent positions disrespects both Christianity and Islam. I have argued that the approach most consistent with orthodox Christianity is to recognize respectfully that Christians and Muslims understand revelation in a way that is ultimately irreconcilable, and that the proper Christian response is to conclude that the Qur'an cannot be taken as the divinely revealed Word of God. Consequently, it is best to avoid interpreting Muhammad as a prophet. This approach, I have argued, best preserves the principles of fundamental Christian theology whilst at the same time opens up as an area for further interreligious dialogue and theological reflection the christological question as to how Muslims can find salvific meaning in the universality of Christ. Meanwhile, Islam continues to play a role in witnessing to Christians the Oneness of God, the reverent submission due in response to God's Majesty, the ontological separation of God from creation, and the call to the unity of humankind modeled on the Divine Unity. In this way, Christians and Muslims have a fellowship of faith, not merely a mutual tolerance, such that they could recognize a sense of being "the nearest in affection" to one another (cf. Qur'an 5:85).

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

VINCENT BATTAGLIA, an Australian citizen, is employed in the Attorney General's Office in New South Wales. He holds an LL.B. and a B.Sc. from the University of New South Wales. He received the Brian Murray Memorial Prize in theology in 2005 and contributes articles to the Australian University *E-Journal of Theology* and to *Compass: A Review of Tropical Theology*.